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# Aristotle, Epistemic Exemplars, and Virtue Epistemology

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## Introduction

An indication of the depth and significance of a philosopher is the frequency in which his or her ideas reemerge into philosophical debate. In this sense Aristotle has few peers. His works and ideas never cease to stir up the waters and actively contribute to contemporary philosophical exchange. This is in evidence in the current virtue epistemology debate.

Over the last couple decades agent-based epistemologies have arisen as attractive alternatives to the more traditional belief-based theories of knowledge. In his landmark article, 'The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge' Ernest Sosa captured the stalemate in contemporary epistemology using the metaphor of the pyramid to represent the foundationalist approach and the raft for the coherentist approach. Both traditional belief-based approaches face serious and seemingly intractable objections. Sosa concludes that for epistemology to free itself from the apparent impasse, it may be valuable to follow the example of ethics. Traditionally, the ethicist seems to be compelled to choose between the Scylla of deontic ethics and the Charybdis of consequentialism. The revival of various versions of Aristotle's character based ethical system has offered fresh hope in the seemingly intractable debate by reassessing the assumption that the individual acts or moral rules are the primary *loci* of evaluation. By turning away from an act or rule-based approach to an agent-based ethic which focuses moral assessment on the attainment and exercise of human virtue (excellences) the ethicist seems to bypass *some* of the more troubling stalemates.

Sosa closes the article with the following suggestion:

The same strategy may also prove fruitful in epistemology. Here primary justification would apply to intellectual virtues, to stable dispositions for belief acquisition, through their greater contribution toward getting us to the truth.<sup>1</sup>

The expression "intellectual virtues" calls to mind Aristotle. Unfortunately, Sosa did not expand on exactly how intellectual virtues could contribute toward "getting us to the truth." Yet the suggestion has had a fair number of takers. And although many of the agent-based epistemic theories which have arisen over the last decade or two, such as Sosa's and Goldman's reliabilism, Code's moral responsibilism, Plantinga's proper functionalism, were hesitant to draw direct parallels to Aristotle,<sup>2</sup> others, most notably Linda Zagzebski, openly associated their theories

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest Sosa, 1980. 'The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge,' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5 (1980): 23. Reprinted in *Knowledge in Perspective*, Cambridge 1991.

<sup>2</sup> In spite of Sosa's valuable and continued contribution to virtue epistemology and his tendency to refer to his theory as a virtue theory, I do not consider his theory a true virtue epistemology but rather as a form of reliabilism, similar to that of Goldman. See 'Proper functionalism and virtue epistemology' (1993; reprinted in part in Guy Axel (ed.), 2000, *Knowledge, Belief and Character: Readings in Virtue Epistemology*. Lahnham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Pp. 33-40). Sosa seems to confuse virtue with that of faculty or capacity. Nor is Sosa alone. John Greco likewise conflates virtue and faculty in his article on Virtue epistemology in the Blackwell Companion to Epistemology. He states, "A virtue or faculty in general is a power or ability or competence to achieve some result. An intellectual virtue or faculty, in the sense intended above, is a power or ability or competence to arrive at truths in a particular field, and to avoid believing falsehoods in that field. Examples of human intellectual virtues are sight, hearing, introspection, memory, deduction and induction (Greco, John. 1992. 'Virtue Epistemology' in *A Companion to Epistemology* edited by Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa. Blackwell Companions to Philosophy series. Oxford: Blackwell. 1992, 520). Properly speaking a virtue is not a capacity or faculty but the excellence of a capacity or faculty; thus seeing is not a virtue but a capacity. Being keen sighted is an excellence of the sight faculty. Zagzebski raises similar criticism (1996, 8-9).

with Aristotle's theory of intellectual virtues as described in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This raises the following question: Is contemporary virtue epistemology in fact a revival of Aristotle's theory of intellectual virtues and an appeal to Aristotelian epistemology?

In this paper I will examine Linda Zagzebski's theory of virtue epistemology, the most explicitly Aristotelian version of the agent-based epistemologies.<sup>3</sup> The objective of this analysis is threefold: (1) To examine to what extent Zagzebski's virtue epistemology is genuinely Aristotelian, particularly in the use of moral and epistemic exemplars. (2) To draw attention to some significant concerns regarding the use of exemplars, such as the famous *phronimos*, in both moral and epistemic evaluation. And finally, (3) to offer a critique of Zagzebski's virtue epistemology, in which I conclude that the most serious problem with contemporary virtue epistemology philosophically is that it is not Aristotelian enough.

### Zagzebski's virtue epistemology

*Virtues of the Mind* (1996) is the first fully developed argument in favor of virtue epistemology.<sup>4</sup> Zagzebski begins with the observation that epistemology, like ethics is a normative inquiry.<sup>5</sup> This can be seen in the very language that we employ while doing epistemology. We say 'She *ought* to believe X over Y' or 'Belief A *merits* our acceptance, whereas belief B *should not* be embraced.' Some epistemic moves are good, some bad. Epistemic stances often receive praise or blame. In so far as epistemology is normative and evaluative, epistemology seems to be similar to ethics.

Of course ethics deals with actions and epistemology beliefs. In ethics we seek good acts, in epistemology, good beliefs. Since beliefs are held by agents, it is reasonable to view some agents as better at producing good beliefs, as in ethics some individuals are better at performing good deeds. A person who consistently performs good acts, non-accidentally, based on good motives and an enduring character we call morally virtuous. Likewise, according to the virtue epistemologist, an individual who consistently and reliably produces good beliefs (that is true beliefs), non-accidentally, from an enduring character should be called intellectually virtuous.

Virtue epistemology rejects an atomistic, act-based approach to normative epistemology in favor of an agent-based approach. Claiming inspiration from an Aristotelian virtue ethic and building on recent advances in reliabilism, virtue epistemology seeks to evaluate epistemology on the basis of epistemic excellences. Since epistemic virtues are *goods* of the agent, Zagzebski argues that normative epistemology should be seen as a "branch" or even "subset" of ethics.<sup>6</sup>

The appeal of virtue epistemology is strong given the apparent impasse faced in traditional act-based approaches and as indicated by the recent deluge of scholarly books and article collections on the topic. Zagzebski claims that a virtue-based epistemology circumvents traditional skepticism, avoids the internalism/externalism dilemma, evades Gettier-type problems, and abandons the unprofitable fixation on justification. It expands traditional epistemic inquiry to include creativity, heuristics, intellectual integrity, open-mindedness, and

<sup>3</sup> Julia Driver draws the distinction between epistemic virtue theory (EVT) and virtue epistemology (VE) stating: "Virtue epistemology, like virtue ethics, holds that virtue evaluation is primary. Virtue theory, on the other hand, is simply concerned with understanding the virtues -- whether they are primary or not" ('Moral and Epistemic Virtue' in Axel, 2000, 124). Zagzebski is one of the most able defenders of the former; adding the even more startling claim that all epistemic virtues are in fact moral virtues.

<sup>4</sup> Zagzebski, Linda. *Virtues of the Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Jaegwon Kim begins with a very similar claim in his article, "What is 'Naturalized Epistemology?'" in *Philosophical Perspectives 2: Epistemology*, edited by J. E. Tomberlin, 381-405. Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing, 1988. Virtue epistemology and reliabilism can be seen as further moves in the broader project of naturalizing epistemology. See Quine, W. V. "Naturalized Epistemology." In *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, 69-90. New York: Columbia University Press, 1969.

<sup>6</sup> Zagzebski, 1996:xv. Interestingly Zagzebski does not take the next step that Aristotle suggests: that we subordinate ethics (along with epistemology) to politics. EN 1.2 (1094 a26-b11).

other neglected truth-conducive dispositions. Finally, it gives the appropriate attention to understanding and wisdom, intellectual faculties that have generally been ignored by both ethics and epistemology.

A central task in virtue epistemology is to convince the reader that we should prioritize epistemic evaluation of the agent and not the individual belief. There are several reasons to prioritize the agent. As mentioned above, a stalemate in terms of more atomistic approaches is one reason. However, virtue epistemologists certainly do not want their approach to be seen as a last ditch effort in epistemology or an epistemology of desperation. So other arguments are needed.

One of the most interesting arguments for shifting epistemic evaluation to the agent is Zagzebski's ontological argument. She argues as follows:

Persons are ontologically more fundamental than acts; acts are defined in terms of persons. It is reasonable to think, then, that the moral properties of persons are ontologically more fundamental than the moral properties of acts, and the latter properties ought to be defined in terms of the former. Hence, virtues and vices are ontologically more fundamental than the rightness or wrongness of acts. The concept of the right act ought to be defined in terms of the concept of virtue.<sup>7</sup>

Zagzebski then suggests that a similar ontological priority exists in relation to the agent and the agent's epistemological properties. The argument is interesting and clearly draws on Aristotelian principles. It is true that the individual is prior to his or her ontological predicates (the nine categories). However, the second step seems to be flawed. Acts are not ontologically subordinate to virtues in Aristotle's *Categories*. Aristotle does not subordinate the category of activity to the category of state (virtue). They are ontologically commensurate (just as different species are ontologically commensurate). Although the language of this argument is Aristotelian, Aristotle does not analyze actions or virtues in this way. Acts are not "defined in terms of persons" but in terms of ends (or goods). Ends in turn are evaluated in reference to greater ends, with the result being that all actions ultimately are evaluated in terms of the *summum bonum*, the final good. Identifying this good of course is central to books one and ten of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Virtue is important in Aristotle's ethics in so far as his inquiry shows that the *summum bonum* of human existence is happiness (*eudaimonia*) and happiness is "an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue." Thus virtue or excellence is not a goal because it is ontologically prior to the act but because it is constitutive of happiness. Virtues and acts are connected in a far more complicated way: Actions are produced inculcated virtues and likewise virtues are produced by performing actions well.

Zagzebski is aware that her shift from ends to persons is not the natural reading of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In fact she concedes that there are two forms of pure virtue theory: the happiness-based and the motive-based approach (197). Aristotle follows the happiness-based approach; she prefers the motive-based. Either, she insists, can provide a legitimate foundation for virtue epistemology.

Zagzebski thus defines an act of intellectual virtue:

An act is an act of *intellectual virtue I* just in case it arises from the motivational component of *I*, is something a person with *I* would characteristically do in the circumstances, and is successful in leading to the immediate end of *I* and to the truth because of these features of the act.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Zagzebski, 1996, 79-80.

<sup>8</sup> Zagzebski, Linda. "Précis of Virtues of the Mind." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LX, no. 1 (2000): 175.

According to this definition there are three components to epistemic virtue:

- (1) Motivation
- (2) An exemplar of virtue
- (3) Success

The motivation component of an intellectual virtue is the desire for truth. This aspect of Zagzebski's theory has already received much attention and I do not wish to duplicate the criticism of others here.<sup>9</sup> Instead, I will focus on the second component of virtue, that of the use of a virtuous exemplar as a criterion of correct procedure. This is a move that seems to be explicitly Aristotelian, at least in terms of his theory of moral virtue. For it is often held that Aristotle appeals to the *phronimos* or *spoudaios* as a moral paradigm valuable in identifying proper behavior.

### The *phronimos* as an exemplar of virtue

In "pure" agent based virtue ethics the moral exemplar defines right acts. In the strongest versions an act is right *because* the virtuous individual would do it. In weaker forms, the fact that a virtuous individual would act in such a way is merely confirmatory.

The idea of referring to a moral exemplar is problematic in both virtue ethics and virtue epistemology, but for different reasons. Let's begin with the moral exemplar whom Aristotle identifies as the man of practical reason [*phronimos*] or the good man [*spoudaios*]. If Aristotle intends the *phronimos* to be a moral exemplar useful in identifying correct moral practice or procedure then he will have to solve several serious challenges. The first problem is that of identifying a moral exemplar. It is presumably possible to misperceive or misidentify the exemplar. One might respond that the *phronimos* for Aristotle is a hypothetical moral ideal, much as the ideal sage is in Stoic epistemology. This, however, only complicates the problem since now we must imagine, invent, or construct the exemplar. What prevents me from importing moral failings into the construction?

What we need then is some *criteria* for identifying or imagining the exemplar. What makes the moral exemplar worthy of emulation and readily identifiable? Presumably the moral exemplar is an exemplar because he or she behaves in a certain way or possesses certain virtues. And why is this way of behavior better than another? Here we are going to have to evaluate the behavior based on certain principles or criteria, for it is the behavior that distinguishes this person from another to the external observer. However, if we have such rules or criteria, what need is there for an exemplar?<sup>10</sup>

Even if we are willing to recognize an exemplar as virtuous on the basis of some kind of moral intuition,<sup>11</sup> we still can't reasonably evaluate an action on the basis of its presence in the

<sup>9</sup> It should suffice to say that on this definition true beliefs held by a person (or machine) which did not acquire these for the sake of knowledge are esteemed as epistemically flawed. See Greco, John. "Two Kinds of Intellectual Virtue." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LX, no. 1 (2000): 179-84.

<sup>10</sup> Zagzebski states, "No set of rules is sufficient to tell us when to place intellectual trust in the reliability of another, or what a person with intellectual courage, perseverance, or discretion would do, and so on. For this reason imitation of the person with *phronesis* is important for acquiring both intellectual and moral virtues..." (1996, 150). I agree with first part of the statement that rules will never produce a reliable moral or intellectual exemplar, however, I don't see how the second part of the statement follows. If anything, the argument shows why we should be weary of moral exemplars as primary standards, and not psychological tools (my suggestion -- see below).

<sup>11</sup> In one of her less critical moments Zagzebski states, "Many of us have known persons whose goodness shines forth from the depth of their being... I believe it is possible that we can see the goodness of a person in this rather direct way. She may simply exude a 'glow' of nobility or fineness of character, or as I have occasionally seen in a longtime member of a contemplative religious order, there may be an inner peace that can be perceived to be good directly, not simply because it can be explained on the theoretical level as a component of *eudaimonia*" (1996, 83). My response to this perception of a "glow" of virtue is that there are people in the world that are very good at generating such glows; we call them con-men, cult leaders, politicians, and movie stars (see the "glow" of Ben Kingsley in *Gandhi* and contrast that to his very different glow in *Sexy Beast*). In short, a glow is no guarantee of moral integrity.

exemplar unless we have some guarantee that the exemplar is infallible. This essentially means that the intuition must be infallible.<sup>12</sup> I do not know how this would be possible.<sup>13</sup> Nor am I willing to follow Zagzebski's suggestion that we attribute to the exemplar "those qualities that have appeared on the greatest number of lists in different places and at different times in history."<sup>14</sup> The best we can do is compare our intuition with some form of act or rule criterion. This, I argue, is what Aristotle does in the *Nicomachean Ethics* -- which should make us reconsider the role of the *phronimos* in Aristotle.

Interestingly, there is an Aristotelian argument against trusting a moral exemplar in the manner suggested above. According to Aristotle the moral value of an act is always relative to the individual (this is different than being 'defined by' or 'ontologically prior' as discussed above). Just as two pounds of meat is too much for one person and too little for another, so in one context one person may reasonably flee a confrontation and still be courageous, while for another virtue would demand she stay and fight. Indeed, in Aristotle's evaluation of the various forms of human conduct he *never* tells the reader to ask what a moral exemplar would do. Instead he asks us to evaluate the conduct in terms of principles such as what would constitute excessive and deficient behavior.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, he always bids us to consider the specifics of the unique situation (the person, timing, object, manner, amount, degree, etc.).

If this is correct, what then is the meaning of the *phronimos* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*? In its most basic sense a *phronimos* is a person possessing the virtue of *phronêsis*. In book six the *phronimos* represents an ethical type, generally contrasted to the incontinent man; but unfortunately Aristotle never fully develops the *phronimos*. The passage in which people tend to use in arguing that the *phronimos* is an exemplar is in book two; here Aristotle defines virtue:

Virtue is a state, capable of choice, being in the mean relative to us, [the mean] defined by reason and as the *phronimos* would define it.<sup>16</sup>

However, a careful analysis of this passage shows that the *phronimos* is not used as an exemplar of virtue, but *as guide in determining the mean relative to us*. In fact, the *phronimos* drops out of sight until book six when he appears in contrast to the morally incontinent agent. So what does Aristotle do by adding the *phronimos* clause that some scholars have made so much of? I suggest that this is essentially a technique to avoid the natural tendency of erring toward desire. Aristotle suggests that when we evaluate our particular context, we should attempt to be objective. This makes sense when we consider the practical syllogism and how our particular desires and specific situation affect practical reasoning. By imagining the *phronimos* performing the practical syllogism we are in a better position to identify *objectively* the mean *relative to us*. Although the juxtaposition of 'objectively' and 'relative' may appear paradoxical, in reality, these act as mutual checks and partially constitute the brilliance of Aristotle's system. This means that Aristotle uses the *phronimos* as an exemplar only in a minimal way, as a tool or check. The *phronimos* is not therefore used as a moral or epistemic ideal in the strong sense of

<sup>12</sup> Contrast Dregeinski, Shane. "Aristotle's Fallible *Phronimos*." *Ancient Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (1996): 139-54..

<sup>13</sup> This is a different question than if the *phronimos* can possess 'scientific' ethical knowledge which is a central concern in C.D.C. Reeve's interesting book (Reeve, C. D. C. *Practices of Reason*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1992). My concern is how those of us who are not *phronimoi* can identify or utilize the *phronimos* as a resource in ethical judgments.

<sup>14</sup> Zagzebski, 1996, 89.

<sup>15</sup> This is Jonathan Kvanvig's criticism of Zagzebski. He states, "The only way to evaluate one person's beliefs in terms of another (or an intellectually enhanced version of the same person) is to have some device in the account to guarantee that the total epistemic situation is the same for both individuals. But since one's understanding of one's circumstance is a central aspect of one's total epistemic situation (the total evidence one has), the understanding a hypothetical person would have of one's situation need not be relevant at all to the epistemic standing of one's beliefs." Kvanvig, Jonathan L. "Zagzebski on Justification." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LX, no. 1 (2000):192.

<sup>16</sup> EN 2.6, 1106 b36-1107a2. This very literal translation is mine.



criterion. There is no indication in this passage that we are to examine the *virtues* of the *phronimos* and attempt to emulate them. Nor am I able to find such advice elsewhere in the Aristotelian corpus.

Zagzebski's use of an epistemic exemplar in her definition of intellectual virtues faces the same problems as the moral exemplar. First, as with the moral exemplar, there must be something which makes one individual an epistemic exemplar and not another. It must be that she is such a person as to reliably produce true beliefs (via epistemic virtues) as well as pursue truth on the basis of correct motivation. Skipping the motivational component for the moment, how do we know that she produces true beliefs? We must analyze those beliefs on grounds independent of her character or virtue. Therefore the exemplar cannot be the criterion but only a rough guide and short cut. This, I suggest, is how Aristotle uses the *phronimos*: he operates as a tool in moral reasoning, perhaps even a rule of thumb like the principles of erring on the side of disinclination mentioned at the end of book II. In short, the *phronimos* should not be seen primarily as an epistemic criterion but a moral aid.

This inability to produce an infallible epistemic exemplar brings us to what I take to be the major flaw of virtue epistemology: it assumes that ethics and epistemology are "structurally parallel" disciplines. It is at this point that Zagzebski fails to be Aristotelian enough. Aristotle repeatedly reminds us that, unlike geometry or science which also make normative claims, ethics is an imprecise study. He states that the same precision should not be expected in all subjects, but that in ethics we must be content in speaking of truth "roughly and in outline" declaring what is "for the most part true." Such is "a mark of good education" (1.3). And again in book two he states that ethics does not aim at theoretical knowledge since "matters concerned with conduct and questions of what is good for us have no fixity, any more than matters of health" (1104a3-5).

Because there cannot be precision, Aristotle is happy to say that the point of ethics is not knowledge but good action. He also constantly offers rules of thumb (like erring on the side of activities against one's natural inclination) and tools for approximating right actions (such as the doctrine of the mean and the *phronimos*). Epistemology, on the other hand, must be the most precise and careful of the sciences since it deals with truth and knowledge itself. Rules of thumbs and exemplars are dangerous in epistemology since minor flaws have a way compounding. This is why Aristotle is so concerned in identifying the most certain first principles and "a principle about which it is impossible to be in error is the firmest of all" (*Met.* iv 1005b13). It is also why he does not attempt to do true epistemology in *Ethics*, but refers his reader to the *Analytics*. Should we follow Aristotle's suggestion and go to the (*Posterior*) *Analytics* we will find an atomistic, belief-based epistemology that is clearly foundationalist -- not a virtue epistemology.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

I have argued that there are some deep problems in the use of exemplars in virtue epistemology as well virtue ethics. This does not mean that they should not be used, but that they should be used with caution and never as a final criterion. The claim that the *phronimos* is such an epistemic exemplar in Aristotle is misleading. In addition, I argued that one of the main reasons that Aristotle would resist virtue epistemology is that the fundamental assumption that ethics and epistemology are structurally parallel inquiries is incorrect. Aristotle does not make epistemology subordinate to ethics or visa versa. These inquiries differ in kind and exactitude. Ethics does not permit the same degree of precision as epistemology.

As traditional epistemology tries to force us to choose between foundationalism and coherentism, and between internalism and externalism, Zagzebski asks us to choose between act and agent. The lesson to be learned from Aristotle is not that epistemology should be subordinated to ethics, but rather that ethics and epistemology can be complimentary:

<sup>17</sup> See Taylor, C.C.W. "Aristotle's Epistemology." *Epistemology*; S. Everson (ed) (1990): 116-42. One might call this the "orthodox" reading of Aristotelian epistemology.

Epistemology has a scientific side and a moral side and we should be grateful to the virtue epistemology debate for emphasizing and articulating the truth that moral virtues have been neglected by epistemologists and that epistemological progress requires the development of intellectual virtues. We must learn to evaluate the truth of individual beliefs (epistemology proper) *and* see the moral value of being fully actualized epistemic agents taking into consideration the range of epistemological virtues that Zagzebski rightly states are ignored (ethics proper). In short, Aristotle teaches us how to do both.